



Learning into action: Employment contracts to prevent forced labour risks

This brief presents how to promote the use of written contracts in cocoa farming to prevent the risk of forced labour, drawing on our experience in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. The good practices presented in this brief could apply to other contexts.

What does the risk of forced labour look like in cocoa?

Forced labour is all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.

In cocoa farming, a lack of formal contracts, as well as low awareness of labour rights, increases the risk of forced labour and allows potentially abusive working relationships to go unchecked.

Common forced labour indicators in cocoa farming include withholding of wages and/or documents, or workers performing tasks that were not specified at the time of recruitment.

Focusing on risks allows action to be taken to address common concerns before a situation degenerates further.

Employment contracts in cocoa farming

In cocoa farming, labour arrangements are often informal and undocumented. Many workers are hired based on verbal agreements rather than written contracts.

Promoting the use of formal employment contracts can help clarify roles, responsibilities, and working conditions, protecting workers' rights and reducing their vulnerability to abuse. Having witnesses to

labour contracts provides an additional safeguard for labour rights.

To encourage the use of written contracts, ICI has developed [contract templates and witness checklists](#) that can be used in the context of cocoa farming. These resources have been created in both written and visual formats to ensure they are accessible and understandable for everyone.

Why promote employment contracts in cocoa farming?

- **Promote and protect labour rights.** Employment contracts are a key safeguard for workers. By clearly outlining wages, working hours, tasks, and conditions, they help ensure decent work and reduce the risk of abuse or exploitation. Contracts also make labour rights enforceable, providing workers with a legal basis to seek redress in case of violations.
- **Strengthen labour relations.** Written contracts benefit both employers and workers by formalising the employment relationship and clarifying mutual expectations. They reduce misunderstandings by clearly outlining roles and responsibilities, and in cases of conflict, they provide a reference point to resolve the dispute fairly.
- **Support community-based grievance resolution.** The use of formal employment contracts has become an important tool for addressing labour-related grievances at the community level. Local committees and grievance mechanisms can use these written agreements to mediate disputes, clarify obligations, and protect workers in cases of conflict. Learn more about community-based grievance mechanisms [here](#).
- **Address forced labour risks.** By formalising employment arrangements and ensuring mutual consent, written contracts reduce ambiguity and help prevent exploitative practices, including deception, coercion, and other indicators of forced labour.
- **Increase awareness and contribute to broader social change.** Beyond individual arrangements, contracts help increase awareness of labour rights and responsibilities across the community. As more workers and employers adopt formal agreements, this helps normalise fair labour practices, empowering others to demand similar treatment and contributing to a culture of accountability and professionalism in the cocoa sector and beyond.



Having a contract helps us avoid misunderstandings; it's easier to resolve issues when both parties know what was agreed upon.

Male cocoa farmer with two seasonal employees, Côte d'Ivoire

How to promote employment contracts in cocoa farming?



Raise awareness

Raise awareness in the community to inform farmers, workers and community members about labour rights and responsibilities and the benefits of formalising employment agreements. Use these sessions to explain key contract terms and share examples. Keep in mind that farm owners may view cocoa farming as an informal activity and may not see the need for formal agreements. Others may be reluctant to sign contracts due to concerns about potential legal consequences. Highlight how contracts help protect both parties, support fair employment relationships, and reduce misunderstandings. Access ICI's [awareness-raising kit](#) on forced labour.



Hand out contract templates

Hand out contract templates to cocoa farmers and workers. Distribute clear, easy-to-use templates that outline essential terms, such as wages, tasks, working hours, and duration. Adapt templates to local languages and literacy levels where possible. Consider the local context when distributing templates: graphic contracts may be useful to explain the content to farmers and workers who cannot read. While a useful tool to explain, people may sometimes be reluctant to sign graphic contracts, since they may not perceive them as “official”, as was our experience in Ghana. However, in Côte d’Ivoire, this was not an issue, and people were willing, and even preferred, to sign graphic contracts.



Involve cooperatives and supply chain actors

Cooperatives can play a key role in promoting the use of contracts among their members, especially by making contract usage a membership requirement. They can also help distribute templates, raise awareness about labour rights and responsibilities, and keep a register of contracts signed between cooperative members and their workers. Training cooperative leaders and staff on labour rights helps them to better support their members.



Set up and train community-based committees

Support the creation of local committees that promote fair labour practices. These committees can raise awareness about labour rights, encourage the use of contracts, facilitate and witness contract signing, and help mediate disputes. Training committee members on human rights, labour rights, detecting forced labour risks, and conflict resolution techniques is essential to empower them to carry out these responsibilities. Learn more about community-based grievance mechanisms [here](#).



Engage community leaders

Engage community leaders in spreading messages and distributing contracts. Having traditionally handled disputes, they are well-positioned to distribute contracts and encourage adoption, especially in areas where formal committees are not yet active.



Want to learn more?

[Contract templates and witness checklists](#)

Awareness-raising [kit on forced labour](#)

Learning into Action: [Setting up community-based grievance mechanisms](#)

Awareness-raising [film on labour rights](#)



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